The American Dream and the Consumer Culture in Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie

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Bachelor's Thesis

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Završni rad

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Abstract

This paper examines the notion of what the American Dream and its consumer culture has meant to individuals throughout the history of the development of American society. As to fully understand the reasons of the creation of this notion, this study takes a closer look at the first American colonies in the light of their religious beliefs. The paper explains the principles that the Dream is built on as well as the virtues that reflect on modern society. Furthermore, the study makes evident that the development of the American society and of the American economy will force the colonies to reevaluate the old values in order to survive in the competitive society. Eventually, with the Competition's byproduct that we call consumerism, we come to the society we are familiar with and in which we live today. This study places a particular focus on the consumer culture in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* as a traditional rags-to-riches story which concerns resourceful Carrie as well as a riches to rags disillusionment which Hurstwood faced by being a passive member of competitive society.

Keywords: American Dream, Consumerism, Puritans, Sister Carrie, Theodore Dreiser

Introduction

Literature can serve as a perfect example for illustrating the historical context for the period in question. 20th century American literature contains the most diverse and fascinating works that have been a milestone of modern and popular literature. Notably, the earliest work of that period is Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, written in 1900. It is considered to be the earliest and the most realistic depiction of the modern American Dream and has served as a model for later authors. Dreiser had been the first who dared to present the conflict between the notion of the American Dream and nature as a literary phenomenon which uses pessimistic elements to illustrate reality. These notions, when put together, present the realistic depiction of American society.

However, to depict what the American Dream means to an individual and to a nation, we must return to an even earlier period; as early as the period of American colonialization. We shall consider the social and political context of America and how the American Dream influenced the creation of a nation. We need three hundred years of perspective before we can have any sense of the importance of the American Dream and its causes. First, we shall divide the American Dream throughout the history: beginning with the American Creed and the American Dream during the time of urbanization. The American Creed started to develop in the 17th century when the Puritans showed resistance to King Charles's and Archbishop Laud's reforms of the 1660's. Laud deemed the Church and the state as inseparable while believing that the Anglican Church should have supreme authority over the English. He took the scot and put it all in the building and restoration of Anglican establishments while negating the Puritan's domination. During the Puritan persecutions, the English exiles and English Protestants immigrated to a land of new opportunities where they could build their societies without external influences and without higher powers. They started to live by certain rules and beliefs that they hoped to achieve by creating specific fundamental principles. These principles were characterized by the doctrine of predestination, which advocated freedom, hard-work, self-discipline, and self-exploration. From then on, settlements of various religious societies and movements from the Old World were gradually converted into American colonies.

The American Creed fully developed in the 18th century when the state was being formed in a document called the *Declaration of Independence* and it involved equality, liberty, populism, individualism, and laissez faire. The belief of self-exploration led the Protestants into commercial activity which later on transformed into the search for economic individualism. Puritans were thus impelled to energizing money making. These may be the first signs of Capitalism in the New

World which led to excessive consumption and competitive consumerism with the Industrial Revolution. The mass production and the innovations had changed the American standard and its principles. Virtues such as humbleness, compassion and humanitarianism were being discarded. Dreiser deals with this form of American Dream: the one that emphasizes the hedonic, aesthetic, and ritualistic dimensions of consumption without any regard for others, which are without doubt connected with the modern understanding of the American Dream.

1. Historical Context of the American Dream

The "Dream" may have started in early 17th century England when the Great Ejection happened. This event took place after Charles II started the restoration of his power and when the Parliament of England prescribed the form of rites of the Established Church of England. As a result, thousands of Puritan clergymen refused these Christian reforms and were expelled from the Church of England. These non-Anglican church members were known for their belief in religious freedom and pursuit of justice which they dissented on a rather radical level during the reign of Charles I. In England, they became quite dominant during the 1640's conflict between the parliamentarians and the supporters of King Charles, when they exited the 10-year war as victorious. But as the earlier New World settlers predicted, the king began his persecution and imprisonment of non-conformists and prohibited any Puritan activities and influences in England. In their pursuit of religious freedom, they sought deliverance from the pending persecutions and settled in the New World. In the search of a new and better life, a group of Puritans settled in Massachusetts to establish Plymouth Colony.

The Puritans first lived a simple life in the small communities that they created; devoting their lives to God and neighbors. They wanted to reform and restructure the life and religion they had in England and create a new life in New England. Thus, America became the notion of a great design; a new land in which the community of God's will would be established and which would serve as an example to the world. This notion was envisioned by John Winthrop, a Puritan who led the English to Massachusetts. He wrote a sermon called "A Model of Christian Charity" which preached of a utopian society that will bring about envy: "For wee must consider that wee shall be as a citty upon a hill. The eies of all people are uppon us. Soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our God in this worke wee haue undertaken, and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world" (Winthrop). Puritans brought from England a strict sense of order and discipline that reflected God's will. This paradigm was called predestination and it explains the nature and purpose of human life in the light of God's plans and promises. Dewey D. Wallace, a professor of religion, explains that predestination is "without foreknowledge of merit or repentance but solely as an act of God's will to redeem some of mankind as a manifestation of grace" (Wallace 301). In this paradigm Protestants believed that God has an absolute knowledge of his plan for redemption of some individuals and he wills their accomplishments so he could bring them salvation. Also, the teachings of altruism and compassion were the main Protestant practices and these practices the sociologists call Humanitarianism. Historian Norman Fiering describes an early concept of Humanitarianism in his article "Irresistible

Compassion: An Aspect of Eighteenth-Century Sympathy and Humanitarianism" and writes that "the doctrine of irresistible compassion has played a large part in the establishment of Western humanitarianism insofar as it was presented in the eighteenth century as both a normative and a descriptive concept. Men are natively humane; if not they ought to be, and those who are not so are something less than human" (Fiering 212). Consequently, Puritans found that virtues such as hard-work, self-reliance, self-improvement, humanitarianism and moral achievements can be invigorating in order to reach that divinity and salvation. Even if these beliefs were initially established on pious grounds, they are the basic comprehension of what the American Dream is and are understood as the oldest creedal values. They became the ideals of American life as 18th century Enlightenment drew out new intellectual contemplating about liberty, tolerance, individualism, and separation of church and state. In his unfinished autobiography written from 1771 to 1790, Benjamin Franklin, as a prominent polymath of the American Enlightenment, depicts the old creedal values as a customary law of self-image and a necessity of advancing society. He applied self-discipline in every-day life, working interminably and improving intellectually in order to succeed business-wise and morally:

> Means of improvement by constant study, for which I set apart an hour or two each day, and thus repair'd in some degree the loss of the learned education my father once intended for me. Reading was the only amusement I allow'd myself. I spent no time in taverns, games, or frolicks of any kind; and my industry in my business continu'd as indefatigable as it was necessary. (Franklin 37)

It was not unordinary for the new generations to deviate from their old teachings, which was based on religious patterns. Benjamin Franklin rebutted his Protestant upbringing and said the dogmas of such religion seemed unintelligible to him (Franklin 37). But much like the Puritans of the preceding century he believed the society needed to live under several virtues, very similar to puritan, to achieve reconciliation between rectitude and material success. For instance, Resolution, as Franklin named the virtue, advocates that whatever you ought to do, you need to do it with resolve and without fail. Also, Industry speaks of losing no time and cutting of all unnecessary actions. These teachings can be verily understood as one's self-reliance. His idea was to apply these and balance them by mastering them one at a time in the order he preset them.

Another writer from that time, the author of the essay "Self-Reliance," Ralph Waldo Emerson, wrote: "Be yourself; no base imitator of another, but your best self. There is something which you can do better than another. Listen to the inward voice and bravely obey that. Do the things at which you are great, not what you were never made for."

By the late 18th century Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and other revolutionary colleagues grounded the new American creed in the The Declaration of Independence, stating that "all men are created equal, they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness" which are summarized as the human natural rights. The Declaration put emphasis on liberty, individualism, equal opportunity and equality, making them the spirit of the age and making them the true American values and the new American creed. A literary critic, Gilbert Keith Chesterton stated in his work *What I Saw in America* that "America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed and that creed is set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence" (Chesterton 7). However, some analysts may argue that America has never lived up to its Creed because besides on natural rights, the American creed rests on political and economic fundamental principles and when put together, they may negate each other. For instance, the question of equality, liberty and nationalism has been and still is present in the American society since racism has embedded in it. Also, constitutionalism can limit laissez-faire, an economic system in which transactions between private businesses are free from government, as the desire for popular sovereignty and democracy can conflict with constitutionalism. American society seems to struggle to find a balance between these as the American Creed has identified too many values to strive for.

1.1 Economic Opportunity and the Rise of Capitalism in Colonial America

It is noticeable that the need and greed to possess materialistic goods and the aspiration of becoming successful was also present among the Puritans. Max Weber, the author of *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* observes the productivity of the new settlers and concludes that the most affluent and prolific society was that living in the New England region where most of the Protestant colonies lie. However, their productivity had always been based on an ascetic labor. The doctrine of predestination has led them to achieve both moral and ecclesiastical purity as well as self-induced calculable performance. The Protestants viewed all work as a spiritual calling that ought to be meticulously executed. Frederick Tolles, a leading historian of colonial Pennsylvania, argues that within this doctrine the acquisition of prosperity and richness through God's will symbolizes their salvation: "If one kept one's inner eye to the Lord and labored diligently in one's calling, one could expect that God would show His favor by adding His blessing in the form of material prosperity" (Jillson, 19). This claim cannot be corroborated because the circumstances of

that age had forced them to further develop their trade and expand their marketplace. Early Puritans and Quakers made joint decisions about the kind of plantations they would own and sell, while believing that religion would give form and direction to politics and economics. Quakers were more inclined to urban trade rather than making settlements, but once they achieved commercial success they established impressive towns and communities.

After the Protestants' dominance over the colonial market came a group of English noblemen who saw having a settlement in America as an opportunity of financial success. These men wanted a quick fortune mainly in the gold industry and plantations. They settled in Virginia, which later on became the main center of the North American population with continuous income of immigrants. The Englishmen invested in hundreds of acres of plantations for these adventurers, far away from any other colonists, and established private business in order to make a personal profit. Thus, a first form of Capitalism arose. T.H. Breen, a historian, depicted Virginians as "ambitious, self-confident men . . . extraordinarily individualistic, fiercely competitive, and highly materialistic . . . by establishing economic privatism as the colony's central value the Virginia Company of London spawned . . . a society based upon the expectation of almost unlimited personal gain" (Jillson 20). They were very different from the Protestants because they chased personal gain, while Puritans, Quakers and other Protestants worked for their communities. The real fortune occurred when the discovery of tobacco proved to be very demanded in Europe. Economic output grew at a rapid rate and soon, around the time of the Revolution, seventy percent could own land and have their own business, while the other twenty percent worked for other entrepreneurs. This shaped an open, entrepreneurial, and competitive form of market and started to mark the self-improvement process of individuals who undeniably rose above Eastern pursuit of the marketplace. Benjamin Franklin described the immigrants as "servants or Journeyman; and if they are sober, industrious, and frugal, they soon become masters, establish themselves in business, marry, raise families, and become respectable citizens" saying that even the poorest ones could have succeeded in such a system.

1.2 Industrialization and Consumerism of the Late 19th Century

In the late 18th century, America came to a turning point where the influence of industry converted society from being mainly producers to becoming more and more consumers.

Americans as producers made the best out of the abundance of nature. By the end of the 18th century, Americans secured their wealth and wages for their families by employing on other farms and working on their own estate. The factor of slavery is not to be ignored since the estate and business owners saved a lot of earnings because of the free labor. The land that Americans owned became a mean to make money, rather than a necessity to survive and the United States mainly focused on its agricultural economy. However, production and free-labor were not enough with the fast incoming of immigrants. The old immigration of the19th century reached its height and sought gain while the old motives, such as religious and political liberty had been discarded. Rather than families, men such as inventors and business originators migrated from the Old World because America became the land of equal opportunities. Finally, rapid urbanization converted settlements into cities and the Industrial Revolution brought the world a variety of apparatus for building business well until the middle of the 19th century. Inventions such as steam-powered engines, mechanical tools, railways, roads and iron production all helped the efficiency of the manufacturing processes, while hand production methods were minimalized to hand operating machinery work. In the time of the industrialization, America invested in roads, canals, railroads and steamboats for better transportation in order to expand export methods and routes. The first cotton manufacturing appeared with the invention of the cotton gin and the textile industry. They advanced the economic status of the United States for decades until the brink of the 20th century when industrialization caused the expansion of factories, business, import and export and made them the factors of America's wealth.

Americans became consumers at the turn of the 20th century. The revolution of production and corporate capitalism gave Americans and those who wanted to migrate there the promise of stability and secure wages with constant productivity. Because of this, people no longer considered America as a place where they succeed as self-made entrepreneurs, but as a place where they are free and financially secure. The production and the demand for products grew equally as well as the social standard among citizens. The large production, the shift works, and free days enabled them to live comfortably and to satisfy their needs for food and entertainment by spending their wages: "increased leisure time, rising incomes, higher educational levels, and general affluence have tended to magnify and intensify the forces of consumerism. The consumer's expectations with respect to the purchased products are founded in a quest for individuality; yet, the market provides mass-consumption products with which the individual is not completely satisfied" (Buskirk 63).

Alongside the growth of the economy, advertisement began to play a crucial part in promoting companies and products. The advertising formats developed from newspapers, artworks and slogans, to mail-ordered advertising. Accordingly, when the marketing of brand-name goods started in the 1870's, advertisers and marketing companies had little choice but to use newspapers. This proved to be an inefficient means of advertising since only a limited number of columns were able to contain advertisements. Then came a more convenient format – magazines which contain pages after pages of marketing. Other convenient forms were real-time sensory advertisement such as public showcases of products. Jib Fowles explains the significance of advertisement for consumer culture quite precisely: "The heart of any advertisement or commercial, however, is the visual imagery redolent with symbolic properties that the advertiser hopes the consumer will find significant. Because images are one kind of symbol and words are distinctly another, a deep, modal tension exists between them within advertising" (Fowles 84).

With the aid of advertisement, Americans went from being producers to being consumers. People's attitude towards the old, rural and traditional life, and attitude towards values and the world changed and a new urban lifestyle and the form of community seemed to appeal to them. These new cultural norms allowed people to strive for comfort and wealth. With the abundance of products and materials, they developed a rather compulsive and competitive behavior which led them to believe in materialism. The obsession with acquisition has become an end in itself and the organizing principle of the American Dream.

2. *Sister Carrie's* American Dream and the Consumer Culture

For Theodore Dreiser, the author of the 1900's *Sister Carrie*, the composition of a literary work that depicts the uninviting and distressing truth about the American Dream was a simple enough task. As a son of a poor weaver who had set out from Germany to America in search of fortune, he had the opportunity and power to minutely describe the struggles of immigrants in urban America from firsthand experiences. He brought naturalism in America into focus unlike any other author and he had shown that American values are complex ideals that are very hard to maintain in the reality of a competitive society. His opus mostly consists of "the struggles and conflicts of his parents, his sisters, his brothers, and himself told in tortuous detail in a series of soul-searching narratives" and stories in which "money and sex were symbols of success or failure as he had known them" (Spiller 168). *Sister Carrie* is no exception. Although we cannot identify *Sister Carrie*'s narrator with Dreiser with certitude, we could draw the conclusion that it certainly contains autobiographical elements. The book and its core is developed through three different settings: the journey to the city of Chicago, the city itself, and Carrie's new life in New York which will be further analyzed.

Dreiser's initial plan concerning this book was to portray America during the time of its urbanization, with its fast transformation as Americans adapted into the new society. In the first part of the story, the narrator masterfully paints us an image of a transition from the rural parts of the country to a big, urban and industrial city "with the rush of population pouring in at the rate of 50,000 a year" (Dreiser). He uses a correlative mean of transportation to present this path of transition: a steam train which was critical to the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century. The main character, Carrie Meeber, rides the train from Columbia City, a small town where old trades and crafts were still relative to the folk, to Chicago, where smoke-stacks of industries, the buildings and telegraph poles tower above the city and its citizens. As a third-person omniscient narrator, he tends to have his own inputs in-between narration of the story and events. He breaks his descriptions with his own philosophical views and opinions to give us a better and clearer picture of the situation and the character's psyche. Keeping that in mind, the narrator predicts right away the fate that awaits Carrie: "When a girl leaves her home at eighteen, she does one of two things. Either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse" (Dreiser). He foreshadows how this story will unweave for the character; either she will remain innocent and virtuous as she had been when living in the quiet small town or there will be a turn of events where she will surrender to the

allurement of the worldly desires and greed. He proceeds to lay down the influence a large city can have to an inexperienced mind without any guidance or warnings: "The city has its cunning wiles, no less than the infinitely smaller and more human tempter. There are large forces which allure with all the soulfulness of expression possible in the most cultured human. The gleam of a thousand lights is often as effective as the persuasive light in a wooing and fascinating eye" (Dreiser). The city he warns us about isn't Chicago, but rather an entity in our psyche when all our perceptions are attacked with something new that causes awe and yearning. He further explains Carrie's nature and interests which are not worth the praise:

> Carrie . . . was possessed of a mind rudimentary in its power of observation and analysis. Self-interest with her was high, but not strong. It was, nevertheless, her guiding characteristic. Warm with the fancies of youth, pretty with the insipid prettiness of the formative period, possessed of a figure promising eventual shapeliness and an eye alight with certain native intelligence, she was a fair example of the middle American class—two generations removed from the emigrant. Books were beyond her interest—knowledge a sealed book. In the intuitive graces she was still crude. (Dreiser)

By being crude and naïve without regard for others, she is more prone to become advantageous when facing new challenges and her own survival. The narrator again offers us his insight in a young mind such as Carrie's: "To the child, the genius with imagination, or the wholly untraveled, the approach to a great city for the first time is a wonderful thing. Particularly if it be evening—that mystic period between the glare and gloom of the world when life is changing from one sphere or condition to another" (Dreiser), saying that young minds, that have not yet experienced the world or its change, who had not travelled outside the known perimeters of their homes and felt the shift of their lifestyle, perceive differently with much more vim and power. Their minds run wild with the city's promise of excitement, new opportunities and new experiences. The Night, however, is a constant emphasized feature of the city. While the day is reserved for commonplaces such as work and hardships of every-day life, night, or in this instance the Evening, offers pleasures and enjoyment under the lights that frame the grandiose size of the city. As the train nears the city, the proof of expansion of the population became more and more evident: fresh two-story frame houses standing in the open fields, uninhabited but ready for the approaching army of homes. At last, while riding the train, Carrie is sensorily influenced by the charismatic Charles Drouet, a traveling sales-man with French family-roots. She saw his well-fitted, attractive attire, his fat purse with stacks of dollars and his civil carriage which evoked admiration from her and she was instantly drawn in. Although she is aware of the distinct inequality between them, she

continues to judge men's apparel by dividing them into “those who are worth glancing at and those who are not,” and proving that if the case was latter, that man would get no glance from her. Drouet has an air of confidence surrounding him and his success could be prescribed to it. Another characteristic we are immediately aware of is his shallowness, much like Carrie's: “A mind free of any consideration of the problems or forces of the world and actuated not by greed, but an insatiable love of variable pleasure” (Dreiser), which is backed by an intense desire for sex. Shallowness is the main cause of materialism by which every character is affected. Drouet uses these attributes and his money to lure women even though the burden of expense is a slight deterrent.

Then, as she reaches the city, we see the true reasons why she has set out into the unknown. She has come there to make a better future for herself and earn her wages in the booming industry. She enters a small unsightly apartment where her sister Minnie, her husband and their child live rather frugally. It is evident that the household is burdened by the question of finances since Carrie is warned by Mr. Hanson at every turn to find a job as quickly as possible. Carrie's brother-in-law, Mr. Hanson, is American born and of a Swede father. He is employed as a cleaner of transport vehicles, a rather lowly job, but he is undeterred and has plans and dreams to build them a house inside the city. After the first impression of the city, Minnie's place and her life soon represented the unpleasant truth of the working class living in the big industrious city. Her issues with the working class begins with Mr. Hanson's family and his claim how work has drained them of happiness and how he was cut off from the pleasures that only money can bring. However, as a young woman full of aspirations she did not let her enthusiasm diminish. She is determined to assimilate into this city lifestyle and obtain her fortune by her wits. She begins her journey by finding a job in the industrial district. The narrator gives an insight into what Chicago was and what it meant to the newcomers, saying it had “the peculiar qualifications of growth which made such adventuresome pilgrimages even on the part of young girls plausible. Its many and growing commercial opportunities gave it widespread fame, which made of it a giant magnet, drawing to itself, from all quarters, the hopeful and the hopeless—those who had their fortune yet to make and those whose fortunes and affairs had reached a disastrous climax elsewhere” (Dreiser). Bearing in mind her rather naive expectations of immediate employment, she is met with the prominent commercial region with its huge factories lining the river's bank. It is something she has never seen before and has not got the vaguest conception of how to approach people or ask for a job. She even felt shame at the thought of being caught looking for a job, being further discouraged when she saw shoppers for what they were – people who came here to spend and not

to seek employment. By avoiding workshops that are anything but scarce and by giving into her cowardice, she spends more time contemplating “the wide windows and imposing signs” (Dreiser) that are lined up for the purposes of temptation and commerce. For this reason, it is seen how she affiliates the city with wealth and class, while there is no place for the rags and the struggling. Furthermore, from the moment Carrie stepped inside the grimy factory, she told herself she doesn't fit in there, “she wondered at the magnitude of this lie and at the importance of knowing much in order to do anything in it at all” (Dresier), while looking at the loud clanking machinery and taking in the onomatopoeic picture of the low-class working society. Her senses are assaulted by “dark, box-lined aisles which had the smell of new shoes”, “low-ceiling room, with clacking, rattling machines at which men in white shirt sleeves and blue gingham aprons were working” (Dreiser).

This character struggles the most with her rumination about the society's ideals by having two extreme moods and going to and fro between them. While being content with the prospect of having a job and a modest income, she is dissatisfied with the outcome she faces after risking her comfortable life in Columbia City, viewing all unfamiliar and mysterious innovations as something that “lost all significance in her little world” (Dreiser). Because of these ruminations, she is faced with a kind of identity crisis. She belongs to the working-class and is painfully aware of it while whishing she could be more. This complex character is marked by the emotions of immense shame and fear that her rural background, religious origins and her destitution will be traced to her. Her ideals of the city folk are viewed as a community with large expenditures of their income for entertainment and pleasures and who know how to use what the city offers in full capacity; but as she sees the crude behavior and speech of the factory workers in their own comfortable state, not bothered by anything and even finding some mindless fun in between work, she displays very obvious disgust towards this class thinking to herself that she “was not used to this type, and felt that there was something hard and low about it all” and that she “did not want to make friends with any of these” (Dreiser). Her identity crisis further develops when she acts timid and reserved with this class, deeming them not sophisticated enough, even though she is wearing the same attire and doing the same job as they are. Carrie's judgmental nature is a result of being young and naïve – she has not had time to experience the real hardships of adulthood and has been without any real guidance. Moreover, a girl alone in the city can only strive for the top taking the fastest lane. So after Drouet had bought her trinkets and clothes, she sees a world of opportunities. Thinking she is wooed and charmed by the man, she is actually directly influenced by the material goods his moderately higher position has to offer. From the moment she is under Drouet's support her identity tailspins out of control. She is given Drouet's “two soft, green ten-

dollar bills" immediately thinking that "she was immensely better off for having of them" and realizing that the money represents the power in itself (Dreiser). She appreciates money for its symbolic meaning, that of power if one obtains it, and not understanding its true value as a mean for survival. Her experience at the famous The Fair department store causes her to have her sense of self and the sense of money to expand "knowing that in the city her clothes go far to fix her identity, making shopping decisions in favor of mentally trying on the range of personalities that are for sale" (Harmon 126). Still, as a character coming from a modest background it is no wonder that questions of morality are constantly being raised. She is struggling between the two images of herself: the one she has created and the other that represents her true self. It transpires that she is aware of "the good" an "the bad" but chooses to surrender to her impulsive nature because it offers luxury and relief from financial difficulties:

> Here, then, was Carrie, established in a pleasant fashion, free of certain difficulties which most ominously confronted her, laden with many new ones which were of a mental order, and altogether so turned about in all of her earthly relationships that she might well have been a new and different individual. She looked into her glass and saw a prettier Carrie than she had seen before; she looked into her mind, a mirror prepared of her own and the world's opinions, and saw a worse. Between these two images she wavered, hesitating which to believe. (Dreiser)

Virtues such as hard-work and morale are lost to Carrie, but compassion for the less fortunate is a feeling she cannot ignore. The character sympathizes the ones who work hard and who sacrifice mental and physical strength to gain an insufficient amount for them to have a comfortable life in the growing capitalism, saying that their toil "seemed even a more desolate thing than when she was part of it" (Dreiser). In comparison, her struggle, very different from those she once affiliated with, is to shape her identity and alter it so she could live vicariously through the ideal of the middle-class model she had created. To achieve this, she tends to imitate her surroundings: one's carriage, clothes, manner, and even speech. Essentially, she is trying to gain attention and admiration from others just as she admired Drouet, her first influential insight of what the middle-class should look like:

> She was created with that passivity of soul which is always the mirror of the active world. She possessed an innate taste for imitation and no small ability. Even without practice, she could sometimes restore dramatic situations she had witnessed by re-creating, before her mirror, the expressions of the various faces taking part in the scene.

> She loved to modulate her voice after the conventional manner of the distressed heroine, and repeat such pathetic fragments as appealed most to her sympathies. (Dreiser)

The author further evolves this character and its tendency of imitation by developing it into an actual talent; a talent she can profit from by becoming an actress. The theater offers her a chance for exposition and fulfillment of her need to be admired and noticed. All the instruments that aid to her transformation are enticing and the materialistic notion of them is what Carrie deems as success. The make-up, "the nameless paraphernalia of disguise, [that] have a remarkable atmosphere of their own," (Dreiser) and the flash of the stage is what she requires to complement her image. She claims that there is no illusion for her on the stage. Whereas in the city she could only dream of fortune and becoming successful, on stage these dreams could become a reality because it is ironically "an open door to see all of that" (Dreiser).

Carrie as a consumer and a materialist is presented quite simply: "an apt student of fortune's ways—of fortune's superficialities" (Dreiser). She is a character of spontaneous acquisition of physical objects she desires and she will overlook the morale of "hard work and a narrow round of suffering" (Dreiser) because she cannot fathom to spoil her appearance and image. On the other hand, the narrator metamorphoses consumers into insects in a rather gruesome manner. Much like a moth that is drawn to a light in the evening, the consumer has "the love of light and show and finery" and the allurements of the night are like "a lamp-flower that must bloom; a strange, glittering night-flower, odour-yielding, insect-drawing, insect-infested rose of pleasure" (Dreiser). Another instance when he uses this analogy is when winter rolls into the city and the simple pleasures of shopping and entertainment overshadow the inconveniences and discomfort that the biting frost of winter brings. The notion of consuming is illustrated as the light and the heat, while the consumers are the insects that require it by pure animalistic instinct:

> If it were not for the artificial fires of merriment, the rush of profit-seeking trade, and pleasure selling amusements; . . . if our streets were not strung with signs of gorgeous hues and thronged with hurrying purchasers, we would quickly discover how firmly the chill hand of winter lays upon the heart . . . . We are more dependent upon these things than is often thought. We are insects produced by heat, and pass without it. (Dreiser)

George Hurstwood, a reputable saloon manager, represents a different kind of influence than what Drouet was to Carrie. Besides impressing Carrie with his wealth and position, he arouses the community's respect and admiration. His job is to cater to the upper class and befriend them, which Carrie viewed with high regard. His apparel, wealth and manners with the occurrence of

well-trained social skills that involve interpersonal relationships are the characteristics of this book's idea of upper-class. Hurstwood viewed Carrie with fondness as a being of unsophistication and youth the first time they met, something he hadn't experienced in a long time, but his opinion quickly changes after seeing her on the stage: "If there was a touch of appreciation left in him for the bloom and unsophistication which is the charm of youth, it rekindled now. He looked into her pretty face and felt the subtle waves of young life radiating therefrom" (Dreiser). Carrie successfully metamorphoses under Drouet's and Hurstwood's scrutiny and she becomes someone worthy of their social position. Both men are from then on adamant to win her over and marry her.

After marrying Hurstwood and eloping to New York, a city considerably larger than Chicago, Carrie adjusts by being a domesticated wife. Her worries are placated by being with Hurstwood, fully believing he will provide for her and that he will again gain his reputable status in this economy. However, Hurstwood is soon clutching at straws being "an inconspicuous drop in an ocean like New York" (Dreiser). Carrie is ignorant of his apprehensions and proceeds to enjoy in what Broadway has to offer. She befriends her neighbors, the Vances, and their cousin Mr. Ames whom she thinks of as educated and sophisticated. She soon is found in a position where she wants to appease him to gain his approval in the matter of becoming an actress. His part in Carrie's life is that of a knowledgeable counselor that would advise Carrie in the matters of her success. Carrie, finally breaking out of her self-inflicted isolation, starts again to measure herself with others, mainly Mrs. Vance. Mrs. Vance is the wealthier one who is a theater enthusiast and Carrie cannot contain dissatisfaction with how her life is panning out. In the following years, Hurstwood's sense of business is slowly decaying because he cannot climb the social ladder in a place with which he is so unacquainted that is unaware of him or his past accomplishments. His investments finally fail and he could not find any prospect of employment. Gradually he becomes a victim of solitary brooding and his aimless thoughts together with aimless newspaper-reading are the only thing "worth while" (Dreiser). He reads advertisements in the newspapers, but at every turn the job offer would seem "either too expensive or too wretched for him" (Dreiser). Although the situation requires him to seek any job with a wage, he chooses to remain unemployed so as to preserve what is left of his social image. He therefore wastes time engrossed in reading articles and the commonplace hardships they relayed while reminiscing about his old accomplishments. Because of the difficulty of the situation, at Hurstwood's suggestion, Carrie once again looks for a job. She browses the "Clipper" papers where she searches for a theatrical agent. While she manages to quickly obtain a job in a theater as a member of the chorus, Hurstwood still idles around which starts to irritate Carrie. It is difficult for Carrie to grasp the reasons of George's

unemployment: he does not have the charm, youth, nor the beauty that she possesses. Carrie's instincts for survival prevail as she slowly climbs the ladder in the business and gains higher positions while George is gambling the money away. Just as the couple starts to be optimistic about their financial crisis, new predicaments befall them. The combination of one being inexperienced in managing finances and the other being desperate is proving to be disastrous. Carrie's "need of clothes—to say nothing of her desire for ornaments—grew rapidly" (Dreiser) and she is mindlessly spending money on clothes. Her new urgings for consumption outweigh the sympathy she felt for George, giving him as little as she could and keeping it a secret when she gets a raise.

Carrie emerges from this situation as the one who is more sophisticated and more successful. She starts to get speaking parts in plays and basks in the knowledge that she is the self she once strived to be. Her revulsion towards George is causing her to distance herself from him; she could not look at what he had reverted himself into. His old torn clothes are the indication of poverty she had once experienced and while moving forward she ignored her morale and decided to leave him in his misery. Hurstwood faced his doom by being a passive character. His discouragement and unwillingness to rebuild his wealth and reputation is what led him to fail while Carrie had risen once again by pure motivation and lust for material goods.

Conclusion

Sister Carrie's American Dream, with hindsight, is the notion of acquisition of what she desires. With disregard of old creedal values such as hard-work, self-improvement, and humanitarianism she gradually succeeds in her intentions. First, she disregards Drouet's generosity and willingness to provide for her by betraying him and ultimately leaving him for another man. She proves that the only loyalty she has ever had is directed towards herself. The American value of self-reliance lies in Carrie's pure survival instinct. The principles of self-reliance have been somewhat different for the Protestants than for Carrie. For the early settlers, self-reliance meant to believe what is genuine to an individual by one's own experience and without imposition of another party's opinions. Through these experiences they would learn of self-respect and self-confidence. Carrie uses self-reliance to push herself forward toward goals she has set for herself. Her upbringing might have discouraged her to succeed in theater, but she tried to do it nevertheless with self-persuasion. Her instincts have led her to take deliberate measures to succeed while reevaluating what others think of as "virtue ethic." The balance between the good and the wrong is soon unreadable because the most honest trait in human nature is the willingness not to give up and to believe in yourself if you want to succeed in your Pursuit of Happiness: "if forces rather than free will determine action, how can we speak of evil?" (Dreiser). The belief of obtaining anything an individual sets out for with only hard-work is undeniably ridiculed in the novel. What comes with hard-work is hardship, something Carrie is oblivious to and cannot see herself practice because her self-interest lies in her own social development and materialistic desire. The urban cities she lives in only serve as a symbol of economic competition and that is what forces Carrie to become future oriented; she shall move forward with society where equal opportunity awaits anyone who dares to obtain it. Since the desire for independence and success is a part of fixed human nature, this idea is part of the dream that many people, no matter the race or culture, are attracted to. America was a vast continent of enormous potential with open opportunities for everyone who came and with abundant natural resources to prosper. In substance, the novel speaks of the traditional rags-to-riches story which concerns resourceful Carrie as well as riches to rags which Hurstwood faced by being a passive member of competitive society.

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